POSSESSION - The Mask: a way of looking at events in a social organism

a 'link', as they say in broadcast talk programmes, from organisational structures to the theatre, via the mask. I describe the workings of the mask in other articles but I think this is the most detailed account. This article was circulated at a conference (I don't remember speaking it - a bit long!) and I received a lot of positive feedback at the time. It is long and at times somewhat technical, and my website spirit hovering over your shoulder will not be in the least offended if you skip bits of it. Nonetheless, I think you may find your persistence rewarded.

In this paper I want to present a concept of a group event, seen as a definite entity with a characteristic pattern; and, hypothetically, as an entity determined by a structuring of psychological energy. The main part of the paper will be concerned with establishing the characteristic dynamic pattern of an event. I shall then indicate the essentials of a theory which I believe can be helpful in making sense of the phenomena described, and to relate them to social change. And I shall pose some questions intended to lead us to consider how we can use such a concept in our role as practical social scientists in the work of facilitating in a group or organisational setting.

The Mask

I want to start with an account of some rather strange effects when masks are worn, drawn largely from work I have done in the theatre studio. I believe the mask phenomenon provides an experience in a rather clear form which relates to a wide range of behavioural situations seen as events, and which helps us to develop a vocabulary and a set of criteria that we need in order to understand them.

The sort of mask I work with most is known as the half-mask. It covers half the face, the top half down to just below the nostrils. So a masked face is made up of the forehead, cheeks, nose and eye-holes of the mask; and the mouth, chin, and eyes looking through the holes, of the wearer. It is also known as a comic mask, and as a grotesque character mask. It is the sort of mask that was used by the Commedia dell' Arte.

Commedia dell' Arte was the name given to a style of theatre practised by troupes of actors who flourished, mainly in Italy, in the 16th and 17th centuries. They worked not from written texts but by improvisation, using scenarios posted in the wings often as little as minutes before the start of a performance. Their masks represented certain characters - Pantalone, his daughter Isabella, her lover Cynthio, the Doctor, the Captain, and various servants, Harlequin, Mezzetin and Scaramouche. These were somewhat grotesque caricatures of very real sorts of people, archetypal characters deriving originally from ancient Greece or Rome and still recognisable today. Some of them form the basis for our Punch and Judy characters.

The art of comic improvisation in performance is not used in our 'straight' theatre now - except for brief inspired and unplanned flashes, usually resulting from some kind of accident. Many variety comedians and film comics use it for their own purpose, and often with a mask-like element in the face. Chaplin used make-up as a mask, once he found his character. Keaton used his own face in a mask-like way, though he didn't use grotesque or exaggerated features (unless we count dead-pan-ness as a grotesque feature!). Clowns in the circus use a mask-like make-up, but they usually work from a script. One place where improvisation of the Commedia type can be seen live in a pure (if unsophisticated!) form is the wrestling hall. Disguises in the wrestling ring function as a Commedia mask did, and the wrestlers work to a basic structure of the same type as a scenario.

The examples I have mentioned so far have been of traditional theatre forms. Contemporary equivalents of the beginnings of the Commedia can be seen, I believe, in the great amount of improvisation used by way-out theatre groups and in happenings and events. *(- of course now - note added in 2012 - 'Impro' can often be seen in many broadcast shows, but this is not the story-structure kind of improvisation in the Commedia tradition).* It is said by historians, and I am sure they are right, that the appearance of improvising troupes in the 16th Century was not accidental. Enormous social changes were under way. The medieval structures were breaking

down, the Renaissance was born, the innovation of Capitalism was starting.

I hope that that in the course of this paper the parallel with our time and the connections between social change and the disciplines of improvisation will become more comprehensible.

So: the masked face is a fusion of the mask in its upper half with the wearer in its lower half. But we cannot isolate the face. The masked face, when the mask is working, is a part of the whole person. The masked person has the neck and shoulders and voice and body of the wearer, and when the mask is allowed to work, the face does not exist alone. In our society it is difficult to actually get your hands on a mask, to use it. Masks can be seen in museums, or occasionally in a performance. But their magic is rarely used. Our society leads us to isolate masks as visual objects. But a mask needs to be part of a whole person.

What does this mean, to speak of a mask working, or being allowed to work? What is the 'magic' of a mask? Is this suitable language for a conference of scientists? I shall now try to define these terms more precisely, by describing what happens when masks are used.

Half-masks are used with a mirror: the new masked face is seen by the wearer. Seeing the new face usually provides a strong impact which can be used physically, to make first one's own face and eventually one's whole body into the new creature: which is part the mask, part oneself. This use of the visual impact of the new mask-face produces a recognisable 'mask-like-state'. This state is a specific entity with certain quite definite characteristics.

In the first place, it has an all-or-nothing quality. This is most strikingly shown when the effect of the visual impact wears off. When a mask is 'working', or in other words when the wearer is in the mask-like state, it is as if a new creature were suddenly there in front of one, convincing, riveting to watch, allowing no time or thought for intellectual questioning. It has an uncanny power, which can be frightening or hilariously funny. When this state wears off, it sometimes happens that the wearer tries to maintain the mask-creature, tries to make it go on doing things. The difference is very clear. The whole thing becomes dull, feeble and embarrassing. Instead of being right, it becomes contrived. There is usually a definite, recognisable moment when this change occurs, and it is experienced subjectively by the wearer, who at this point has to start thinking what to do next, instead of just doing it.

The second important characteristic of the mask-like state is that certain masks produce specific recognisably similar effects in different wearers. Of course, since a mask-creature is an amalgam of the mask and the wearer, there will be certain features in a mask creature that are specific to the wearer. Nonetheless, the similarities due to the mask can be striking. They may be physical characteristics, like a tilt of the neck or a hunched shoulder, they may be propensities like sniffing at things, or they may be character traits like aggressiveness. Some masks seem to produce one mask-creature, others produce two or three, but in these cases they are not just a number of vaguely different creatures but two or three well-defined character entities, so that if many different people wear them the creature that appears is recognisably one of these two or three. Of course, I am talking about wearers who have not seen a particular mask worn by someone else before - indeed possibly may not have worn any mask before, or previously heard of this use of masks at all. In fact to have seen a mask used by someone else can be an interference with ones own use of it. It seems to make direct use of the visual impact more difficult.

There are a number of other characteristics of the mask-like state. At first it may last only a matter of seconds, but with repetition with the same mask, or with skill in using masks, the impact in the mirror can be used and developed. So a mask character can eventually be sustained for as long as half-an-hour or more, can learn to speak and can follow instructions (in other words a scenario). However, a mask will only do what is 'right' for it. Making a mask do what the wearer is doing rather than the mask-creature may disrupt the state. Making a mask-character do what is wrong for it is certain to disrupt the mask-like state. Touching or adjusting the mask is pretty sure to disrupt the state unless it is very well established. This often happens the first time a mask is used, when the mask-creature has not yet learned to move its hands anyway, the wearer doesn't know how the mask uses its hands. People new to using a mask will try to adjust their hair - it never works. If the wearer tries to speak before having discovered the mask's voice and how it articulates, then that will

disrupt the mask-like state.

The state can be restored by a skilled wearer. Usually a return to the mirror can give a fresh 'charge' of the visual impact. Some mask-characters, as they develop, get attached to specific objects, for example a hand-bag or a walking stick or an old waistcoat; if this object is not there the mask-like state may be more difficult to achieve, and if the object is handled or used then a threatened mask-like state can be restored. All mask-characters have certain exaggerated physical characteristics, and a deliberate concentration on the physical feel of a mask-creature may restore the state. Some may have a particular noise in the throat, or some other physical peculiarity which does the same. I have come to regard these various reinforcing manoeuvres as trigger mechanisms; and the things that disrupt the state as negative trigger mechanisms.

In the mask-like state the subjective sense of not having to think out what to do next is important. When the mask is working, the wearer finds himself just doing things, at least in moment-by-moment behaviour, and at least when a 'beginner'. When a mask-character has been developed by a skilled wearer it is possible to give it general directions, which may be as elaborate as the structure-sequences of a narrative scenario. But even then the moment-by-moment acts of a mask-character can be highly unpredictable and spontaneous, at the same time remaining absolutely spot-on and appropriate.

This raises the question of control. With someone using masks for the first time it is important to watch what is happening. Some masks can produce quite violent effects. I regard it as essential to plant the instruction 'If I say take it off, then take off the mask', before the wearer puts it on. A degree of control becomes possible with skill and with some experience of the particular mask. To be most effective, instructions need to be 'fed in' before the mask-like state is established - though one can only be quite sure that the mask will actually carry them out once one knows it really well and knows what is right for it. A skilled wearer develops a sort of division in the mind, so when in the state one part of the mind is functioning as the mask-character and one part as the wearer.

So: by now it must be obvious that I believe the mask-like state is a trance phenomenon, similar to the hypnotic trance and similar also to the trance of possession as in a Voodoo ceremony. I think it is legitimate and useful to speak of the wearer being 'possessed' by the mask when the mask is working. I believe that the features of the mask evoke particular responses, which may be innate or may be based on stored experiences of facial features; and that these responses are shared within a wide cultural context and some of them are shared perhaps within the human species. I believe that the mechanism of possession can be fruitfully comprehended in gestalt-psychology terms: that when a wearer is 'possessed' by a mask, behaviour is keyed in to a particular gestalt, the gestalt of the mask.

Before going on to look at the consequences of this view, there are some features that a mask-like state shares with a state of trance that I think are worth considering. First, there is the importation of an apparently alien and convincing condition or being, with certain consistent and recognisable components. Second, the state develops and 'deepens' with repetition. Third, it is facilitated by trigger mechanisms, and also impaired by what seem like reverse trigger mechanisms. Fourth, there is an intense focussing of attention, which amongst other things produces an anaesthesia - I have seen people hit quite hard in a mask-like state and not feel pain till they take the mask off. Fifth, there is a characteristic quality of control, as I have described - contrary to popular imagination, it is possible to be in a hypnotic trance and at the same time to have some awareness of what is going on and some control over it. And sixth, there are parallels in descriptions of Voodoo ceremonies. Anyone interested in following up the 'theatrical' aspect of Voodoo possession (which is strictly relevant to the question of control in trance) and of Voodoo possession in general should read an excellent book, *Voodoo*, by Alfred Metraux (André Deutsch 1959), especially chapter 4 of part III.

An integral part of the mask-like state and one of the most valuable parts of the experience is the strong quality of involvement and absorption. This can be of the simplest sort. One of the first things that a new mask-creature does is to explore objects, and it relates to objects somehow as if experiencing them anew, with a complete and convincing absorption. A mask

that works is usually quite a powerful experience for the wearer, especially one who has not used masks much. It can be exhausting to wear (an exhaustion that is not felt till it is taken off) and it can be disturbing. A few people are so disturbed that they take their first mask off at once and refuse to wear another. It can also be very exhilarating.

I believe this involvement provides a criterion which can be useful to us in general. To allow oneself to be 'possessed' by a mask entails a degree of abandon which is unusual. There are many defences against it. Touching the mask, adjusting the hair, laughing, being clever or intellectual, constructing a character instead of letting one happen, all these I now regard as defensive manoeuvres against possession by a mask. So what about 'possession' in general?

Hypnosis and possession are unfashionable, not to say disreputable, in our society. However, I believe there are many commonplace behaviours in our everyday life which can be usefully examined within these terms. I don't wish to get into a controversy over what hypnosis is or is not, or whether it is something that we should or should not experience or deal with. But I do want to establish the use of the term possession, because I think it is the most useful way to consider these phenomena.

Possession in Everyday Life

The state of possession is one which is still embodied in certain phrases in our language. We can be possessed by anger, or by courage, or by an idea, and we must all have experienced such a condition. We have all experienced moments in our lives when we stop consciously thinking out what to do and just act. A waste-paper basket catches fire. You grab it by the base and take it to the bathroom, throw it into the bath and turn on the taps. Then your thoughts catch up with what you have done. For a moment you seem to have acted without thought. I read once a newspaper report about someone who had just bought a new suit when he passed a little dog struggling in the mud at the side of a river. He immediately rushed in and rescued the dog, then, back on the side, he burst into tears because he'd forgotten his new suit. There were other people there and he said he would certainly have left someone else to go in if he had remembered.

I am trying to connect the nature of the experience with something that we can all recognise. The examples which are most similar to masks are those in which clothing is related to role. When a barrister or a judge puts on a wig, their behaviour changes and they feel different. So does a bus conductor. A policeman in uniform is more powerful. A soldier wearing a gas mask and carrying a rifle can be a positive danger, as could be seen in the famous Chicago Democratic Convention of 1968. It is useful and legitimate, I believe, to talk about these people being 'possessed'. But what are they possessed by? Even phenomenologically, it would obviously be inaccurate to say they were possessed by a wig, or whatever. If someone who is not a lawyer puts on a wig it does not of course have such an effect - except in a game situation where the role is being 'played'. (As would be the case in the theatre). It might be more accurate to say they were possessed by a role.

A little exercise with TV which any of us can try might seem to support this view. Find a programme in which someone is speaking or being interviewed, turn off the sound, and something happens to the person on the screen. I usually get a very clear feeling as to whether this person is 'faking' or not. This doesn't mean telling the truth or not, though that may be connected. But more exactly it means something else: which we can characterise by saying that either he is 'possessed' by his role or he is not. There is something of the same all-or-nothing quality as with the mask. Either it is totally convincing, or it is embarrassingly phoney. Turning off the sound is important. Presumably it needs some disruption of the normal perceptual set that we bring to television to make us fully sensitive.

The quality of possession is present in a number of other situations, and now we are moving towards the idea of the group event. In a concert, there is often a quite definite moment when the performer suddenly starts to play. Up till that time, he or she (the phenomenon is most clear with a soloist) has been sort of going through the motions, and so have we, the audience. But at this point, which afterwards we can often locate to the exact bar, it is as if something opens out. The performer stops feeling nervous, and so do we for him. Technical

problems are forgotten, or at least they take their place in the total performance, and the music flows. Of course I am talking about a concert that 'works'!

In the same way, we can look at the phases of a meeting. There is commonly a starting phase, in which there is some formality, in which there is some difficulty in finding (or at least expressing) a real focus of interest in spite of the agenda, and in which (again) people seem to be going through the motions. Then, often signalled by expression of feelings, either of shared excitement or more commonly of conflict and hostility, the meeting seems to change gear. It moves into a phase in which work is done and decisions are made (assuming the conflict can be handled). Finally there is a third phase of the meeting, in which attention is already disengaged and people have mentally already left, only staying in order to finish the thing off correctly.

A less structured event is a party. That's to say it has a less clearly defined beginning and end, there is no printed programme of a concert or agenda of a meeting. Such structure as it does have is provided by the norms that are generally accepted in the social organism within which it takes place and that are brought to it by the people there. In a party we can again often recognise three phases: an awkward winding up period; a time when things just go, and nobody worries very much about what to do and whom to speak to - though of course there may be some private agendas around; and a final quiet hour or two at the end, when people sit around drifting, talking, waiting for the formal end of an event that in some way has finished already.

I can't think of any event that is without any predetermined structure at all. (Are there any?) But there are some events that have very little structure. Examples of very unstructured events are: 'happenings', with an important unscripted element; cluster activities in children's playgrounds; events that occur in a T-group which is working very spontaneously. In these cases the 3-phase dynamic is particularly visible. So I'm going to try to do a precise description.

The first, winding up, phase is contrived and awkward and difficult: in performed 'events', people in the audience shift about, even get bored and leave; it corresponds to the 'vacuum' in a behavioural training event. The second phase is a time when things 'work' or 'flow': people do not spend thought on what to do next but just do it; there is a concentrated absorption in what is going on; that place at that time seems to be the centre of the world, and real. Then this phase finishes: and if there is no structure to hang on to then once again now what happens often seems wrong or false; and attached as a postscript to a recognisable end to the event proper.

We can study the 3-phase dynamic by setting up deliberately an isolated, unstructured event. One of the central problems of improvisation is: how to be spontaneous to order. John Cage, the contemporary American composer, writing about the way his interest at a concert is engaged as much by the incidental visual occurrences as by the music, drew attention to the horn player emptying spit out of his horn. But what would happen if we asked a horn player to 'perform' emptying spit from his horn? If we asked him to come out on the stage alone with his horn and empty it?

There is an exercise which tackles this problem at a very simple level. It is for one person (whom I shall call the 'performer') and one object. The object needs to be rather amorphous, like a piece of material for example. The object is put on the floor and the performer is given the following instructions. We can call the instructions a script. (NB: a script is always, even the script of Hamlet, a set of instructions).

> *Sit next to that. Become aware of it. Do anything you want with it, or nothing.*
> *Don't do anything you don't really want to do. Finish when you don't want to*
> *do any more.*
> *Don't decide beforehand what you're going to do. It starts when you sit down.*

Now, if the performer is able to commit to fulfilling this script, we can usually see a small isolated event, and we can observe the characteristic features of the middle phase of that event. There is an absorption by the performer with the object and with what he is doing and

this absorption is shared by the onlookers. There is a lack of self-consciousness. There is a sort of directness about what happens which makes it seem 'truthful' and makes it 'work'. What happens is expressive of the person doing it and may be rich in imagery. There is a recognisable 'beginning' and 'end', not by deliberate intention but by the quality of what is going on, which distinguishes the middle phase of the event, especially from the third phase which appears quite false.

Afterwards, the content of the middle phase is memorable, with a peculiar dream-like clarity, similar to that of memories from real-life events. There is a further quality of lack of planning, of letting things happen rather than making them, of an unexpected appropriateness. This corresponds with the state of mind of the performer, who may not know from one moment to the next what he is about to do, or, if he does, shelves the knowledge and uses it only when it is needed by the object, so to speak.

A point of interest in the 3-phase dynamic of an event, already alluded to, is the entry into the 2nd phase. The characteristic feeling of this transition is one of release. It is an enjoyable experience which provides a feeling of success. The difficult, awkward striving in the improvised 'happening' gives way to the release of a creative flow. The nervous tension of a performance likewise. In a meeting there is a release of what people are really after.

The moment of release is well known in the athletic event, the long-distance runner calls it second wind. In the explosive event in athletics, release has to come at the moment of effort. Hence the fascinating winding up manoeuvres of the high jumper Dick Fosbury, for instance, or of the weight throwers studied so intensively in Kon Itchikawa's film of the 1964 Tokyo Olympics.

There is a comparable release phenomenon also at the level of functional groups of muscles. When a dancer does a stretching exercise, the particular muscles are put under a slow and steady tension. After a time, perhaps 20 seconds, the muscle gives. It is then properly released. But what is of vital significance, it is also ready for work. It is a constant characteristic of release phenomena that when the state of release is achieved it is also the state of most effectiveness. In the case of a muscle, or an athlete, it is well-established that we can work for release. We can study what blocks release and what facilitates it and we can try to bring about the right conditions. The trainer is the athlete's personal change-agent.

If we try to remember what it is like to master a physical skill - like ride a bicycle for example: once again there is a moment when some new physical awareness or some new physical facility slips into place and we can do it. There may be several such moments, as we master different parts of the skill, or many hundreds of such moments in the development of a complex skill like playing the piano.

We are now into the area of learning. If we think of the learning event as one in which a problem is solved, then again we have an event as here defined, with a 3-phase dynamic. In the first phase, information is gathered, the data of the problem are made familiar. Some tentative steps are made towards organisation but the process is sticky and may require persistence to keep it going. There is an anxiety, an awareness of tension, of something being wrong or awkward. At some point before a solution begins to be seen there is a fairly sudden rise of excitement, and if in a group, of involvement. This is the transition to the second phase, the actual 'creative' period when the data is being organised in accordance with the new solution. There is a 'release' into a period of 'creative flow'. And then this phase finishes. When the psychological energy from the tension of the previous lack of a solution, and by the pleasure of arriving at a more satisfying solution, is spent, the second phase is over. The third phase of a problem-solving event is concerned with a formal consolidation: writing, shaping and refining, checking connections and implications, perhaps just saying goodbye.

The simplest kind of problem is one which is solved in one problem solving event, but of course some problems require many periods of creative flow for their solution. It is easy to conceive of a hierarchy of event-structures. A single event provides a release of tension for a small problem-area; but this small problem area is a part of a larger problem-area. Also, the consolidating activity of the third phase must derive its energy from somewhere, and again

this could be from a longer term 'event'. But I am only concerned here with the dynamics of the single event.

In all the above examples that I have been going on about, we can see the pattern of the **group event**. It has a 3-phase dynamic in which the middle phase gives the event its real life. The middle phase is the 'possessed' phase. It is the phase which is comparable to the mask-like state.

Yes, possession implies possession *by* something. In the case of the mask, it may not quite make sense to speak of the wearer being possessed by the mask, but I think it makes sense to speak of the wearer being possessed by the character-gestalt of the mask. I have already used the phrase 'possessed by his role' in connection with mask-like objects such as wigs and uniforms, and in connection with the performer on TV. What is it we are possessed by in a concert? Well, clearly the spirit of the music, its tradition, its cultural associations. At a meeting? I think there *is* a useful sense in which it is legitimate to speak of being possessed by, say, the spirit of a construction programme, if that is what the meeting is about. Does it make sense to speak of the performer being possessed by the object? Again, I think it does.

In the relation between the person and the object we can see a universal relation between persons and objects. The absorption and lack of contrivance in the middle phase seem to reflect the absorption and lack of contrivance which can be present when a craftsman makes an object; when a bulldozer driver drives an object; when an architect designs an object; when a surgeon operates on an 'object'; when a brick-layer builds an object: in all of these assuming that the middle phase is achieved - that the event 'works'. There seems to be a difference between a table or a building that is 'contrived' or is 'truthful'. It does seem to make sense to speak of an architect, say, being possessed by his building.

I am suggesting that there is a direct connection between the state of the person while relating to the object, and the outcome of this relationship. The outcome here means the effect of the relationship on the object, and the effect of this outcome on other people. We can look at the exercise described above, of the performer with the object, as being the simplest component in a grammar which relates a person with an environment. But of course an environment is not just the objects around us. We need to place the relationship between the person and the object within the total environment of the social organism - whether the organism be a family, a small group, an organisation or a society.

Possession in the Social Organism

As we all know very well, the middle phase is often not achieved. Many events do not 'work'. How are we to account for the difference between a situation where events work and where they do not? I want to outline a conceptual framework within which I believe it is possible to answer this question.

We have seen that the 3-phase event dynamic is applicable to events that are very structured and also, through a continuum, to events that are very unstructured. The difference between a structured event and an unstructured event needs to be clear in order to understand why events work or do not work.

The 'structured' event is closely linked with the established patterns of a social organism. We could say that the established set of patterns of behaviour of a social organism is actually made up of the structures of its structured events. A very simple structure is shaking hands, which belongs to the event of meeting another person. Saluting or bowing belong to the event of meeting another person where status and power are important. A complex structure is the marriage ceremony, which belongs to the event of formalising a long-term sexual and family relationship. Ceremonies and rituals are always highly structured events. If an event which is a ritual 'works' - if it enters the possessed phase - then it is part of a social organism which has a stability within the area of that ritual. We can go so far as to define the stability of a society by the extent to which its structured events 'work'. In the terms of our framework, this means that the people who take part in that event are able to become possessed by it.

When an event stops working, the event structure, or ritual, continues to be used for a variable period of time, even though people no longer become possessed by it. They go through the motions, but somehow the thing is phoney. A rather banal example is the playing of the National Anthem after performances of plays and films, which is an event that stopped working long before it was discontinued. When the structured events in a social organism no longer succeed in achieving a possessed phase, that is a symptom. A structured event will fail to work when that social organism is changing. The time will come when its existing patterns are no longer appropriate.

In order to make sense of the word 'appropriate', a theoretical framework is needed which connects change in a socio-technic environment to social patterning, and connects social patterning to group and individual psychological structuring. This is not the place to attempt to develop such a theory in detail, nor to relate it to other work, but only to indicate some starting points. I think the psychological concepts that can help us are congruity/dissonance and, again, gestalt theory.

We can hypothesise something like this. An individual grows up within a socio-technic environment which has certain patterns of social structuring, as expressed in event structures. As a result of interacting with this environment, certain gestalts are incorporated which will determine behaviour, and which we can call behavioural gestalts. If the environment does not change, then behaviour, as determined by behavioural gestalts and as expressed in structured events, will be congruent with the environmental gestalts. In terms of possession, structured events will 'work'. If the environment does change, then behaviour as determined by unchanged behavioural gestalts, will be incongruent with the new environment. Structured events will not work (unless, perhaps, artificially or forcefully maintained).

So we can call the kind of event which embodies a congruence between behavioural gestalts and environment gestalts a structure-stabilising event.

The 'unstructured' event is quite different. It is related to the changing patterns of a social organism, or to its lack of patterns. It is a part of that social organism's search for new patterns. An unstructured event that works is a part of a social organism which is unstable or changing. It is related to creativity.

In so far as the unstructured event is a ritual, it is a ritual of exploration. Improvisation in the theatre, for instance (I mean improvisation in performance) works, I believe, as a ritual which represents our current experience of being frequently faced with unexpected situations.

In the terms of our theory, unstructured events will be an expression of the impetus to deal with the incongruity between unchanged behavioural gestalts and a changed environment. An unstructured event will work when it achieves the formation of a new behavioural gestalt (or a part of one) which is congruent with the new environmental gestalts. An unstructured event will fail to work when the escape from old behavioural gestalts is blocked, even when they are felt to be inappropriate.

So we can call the kind of event which embodies a search for new behavioural gestalts in response to new environmental gestalts a structure-seeking event.

Of course it is oversimple to speak of an event either working or not working. People are different and people respond to change differently. A structure-stabilising event will work for some people and not for others.

Also, some people for whom it has ceased to work will be able to enter the ambiguity resulting when an event-structure is abandoned, and others will not. So we can equally say that a structure-seeking event will work for some people and not for others. And it is oversimple to speak of an event being either structure-stabilising or structure-seeking.

However, having established the general terms of a conceptual framework, it will now be

useful to see how it can be applied to actual situations in which we are involved as change agents, consultants or facilitators, or as participants in a constructed change-situation: or indeed as real-life participants in a real-life situation!

Uses

In the first place, I suggest that the factor of possession provides a new dimension for looking at a social organism. None of the existing models, so far as I know, considers the possession phenomenon.

If we look at a work team, for instance, we may do so in terms of its task-process; its interpersonal relationships; its communication, within the team itself or in relation to the rest of the organisation; in terms of the whole Gibb model; in terms of intergroup phenomena; in terms of job-satisfaction (but see note at end of paragraph re Herzberg's work); in terms of the Bion model, basically one which opposes work and 'emotionality'; of a more extreme psyho-analytic model; in terms of the relation of the organisation to its environment in the NPI model; or a mixture of several of these. But I do not think that any of these looks directly at the events which take place in terms of whether and how fully those events enter the 2nd phase of a 3-phase dynamic in terms of the 'possession factor'. (Herzberg's theory is interesting in that he relates job-satisfaction to 'good'and 'bad' memories. I have indicated that what happens in the second phase is remembered, but also that the second phase is satisfying. This would seem to suggest that a modification is required here - such as that an 'event' can also have a 'bad' second phase. I'm sure that must be true! Bad experiences also must surely happen in an event that 'works'. But I haven't fully explored the consequences.)

I do think we need information in this area. How much does an organisation 'possess' people? At which levels, and precisely where, are people possessed or not possessed? Where is the real creativity in an organisation (on the presumption that creativity is the product of a 'possessed' work group?) Are the things that are being done in this organisation, or in response to that particular crisis, producing more 'possession' or are they irrelevant? And, at a more complex level, what precise relation does the extent to which possession occurs bear to the realities of the environment? IE the organisational environment of a group; the environment of which the organisation is a part; or the societal environment of which the organisation is a part?

Secondly, there are crucial questions to answer about power. What power-structure is appropriate to a particular situation? In the terms of John Southgate's power-ratio notation, when is a 9/1 power-ratio appropriate, and when a 5/5 power-ratio? And what do we mean by appropriate?

It is a common behavioural science assumption that a power ratio around 5/5 is 'appropriate' to a situation of rapid change and high complexity, ie with many variables. The theoretical bases of this position comes from management work such as Burns & Stalker's classic *Management Of Innovation* and other work which considers the relation between the organisation and its environment; from sociological work such as Hagan's *On The Theory Of Social Change* (esp chapters 1, 4 and 10); and from cognitive complexity theory as in Schroeder, Driver and Streufert's *Human Information Processing* (esp chapters 9 and 12).

But however necessary and excellent such theorising may be, it does seem rather like rationalising after the event. It's all very well to produce a theory which explains afterwards why a particular power structure is considered rationally appropriate to a particular environment. Why does it work in terms of involvement and commitment? How is it that in an actual situation people react positively or negatively to a particular power-structure? And as designers, what situation are we going to devise? What is *our* power!? Indeed, is it the power-structure people are reacting to or is it other factors?

If we look at an organisation in terms of possession and relate this to its event structures in such a way as to make power-ratios an operative component in the event-structures, then we should begin to get some answers to these questions. What power-ratios are associated with possession, and in what situations? What power-ratios inhibit possession? *(note added in*

2012 - interestingly, in our time there is another structure that has become widely significant: pay!)

The third point I should like to consider is: strategies for actual specific events. How can we isolate and change the factors which encourage or inhibit the possessed phase in the events of a particular group? Here I shall use as a model the innovative problem-solving group. I shall use as an example an experience of a set of workshops, run jointly with John Southgate and Gary Robins, in which we trained groups of scientists from Sussex University in innovative problem solving. The project was partly financed by I.C.I. - a report is currently in preparation.

A lot of this is well known and often practised in 'brain-storming'. But I think an awareness of the event structure and the state of possession and some techniques related to these, that we used in these workshops, proved fruitful and may be of wider interest.

In terms of our theoretical framework, the innovative problem-solving event is a structure seeking event. It seeks new structures, in this case structures with which to organise the information within a technical problem area. Our basic hypotheses can be expressed in the following way:

1. That information is seen through the gestalts that are imposed on it.
2. That in order to obtain new solutions we have to do two things,
   i. escape from those existing gestalts;
   ii. import new gestalts.
3. That the brain resists abandoning an existing gestalt. (One of the fundamental laws of gestalt theory is concerned with the dynamic towards structuring. See for example Max Wertheimer's *Productive Thinking*).
4. That new, exploratory gestalts are encouraged by processes such as free-association, analogy generation, and temporary commitment to a perception of the problem which is consciously divorced from reality.
5. That social factors affect the extent to which 'gestalt exploration' is possible.

So our strategies were concerned with abandoning existing structures imposed on the problem-information; and with finding new structures. And in each case with the structuring of the social climate, as follows.

1. Abandoning existing structures.
   i. Techniques to escape:
      Free-association
      Not planning
      Not evaluating
      Disruption
   ii. Social climate:
      Trust and support; cohesion; non-conformity
      External evaluation suspended; self-evaluation; possibly some peer-feedback
      Self-directing group
      Power relationships near to 5/5

2 F inding new structures.
   i. Techniques to explore and import:
      Analogy generation (as in synectics techniques)
      Physical enactment
      Working as a group with a common structure
      Specific possession techniques - eg work with masks
      Outside specialist resources - if group asks for it.

   ii. Social climate:
      Working together; using each other's ideas
      Trust and support; cohesion; non-conformity
      Evaluation - as above
      Open-ness; conflict allowed
      Self-directing group

Power-relationship near to 5/5
'Expert' power allowed to operate whenever a useful resource.

We can underline some items here. First, an intellectual climate has to be established which reduces the anxiety from abandoning existing structures, and which is conducive to working together on new structures. Our experience suggests that even in a technical problem-solving group, group-composition on Will Schutz's FIRO B dimensions seems to be a significant factor in establishing such a climate. Secondly, specific structure-escaping and structure-importing techniques can be very useful. And thirdly, it needs to be remembered that the finding of a common set of structures is what the process is about.

The gathering of existing information has not been mentioned in the above scheme because this has been assumed, but it is of course essential, even when the focus is non-technical. Insufficient information may inhibit entry into the possessed phase; and knowledge of inadequacy in existing information is part of the impetus towards structure-seeking. For example (to take a non-technical problem): a successfully resolved intergroup conflict can be seen as a structure-seeking event in which common structures are established between two groups which previously had disparate structures, and in which the impetus for the event is strengthened by the making known of information, as by the exchange of data between the two groups.

The strategies for a structure-stabilising event will be somewhat different. I think they are likely to include ritualistic, repetitive procedures; and these procedures will embody the common structures that already exist - i.e. that are already shared by the people in that social organism. This means that anyone who wants to facilitate the success of structure-stabilising events in an organisation needs to seek out what are its common structures. I suspect that at the present time this will often not be an easy task - at least not once the underlying structures beneath a formalised ritual are explored.

So, if we are concerned with facilitating an event, these are the questions that need to be asked.

1. Is this a structure-seeking or structure-stabilising event?

2. If structure-seeking, is the intellectual and social climate one in which existing structures can be abandoned and new structures worked with? Is the relevant existing information known? Would particular structure-escaping or structure-importing techniques be helpful? Is this event seeking structures which can be shared by people in the wider environment of that social organism; and to which area of that environment do they relate?

3. If structure-stabilising, are the structures that this event embodies shared (really shared) by the people involved? If yes, does the event adequately embody these structures, or can this representation be improved? If not, what prevents this event from being changed, or perhaps abandoned?

Finally, I think there are some questions regarding possession that we could ask, and perhaps even answer, by applying them to this conference. What events in this conference have gone into a possessed phase? How do we measure, evaluate it? Did possession lead to satisfaction? Did it lead to production? What factors helped a possessed phase to occur? What factors blocked a possessed phase?

Which events have been structure-stabilising and which have been structure-seeking? Assuming that we attach value to events which are successful in terms of possession, what actions could we take to facilitate such events?